

HOW CHALLENGING? BY CHIP DENTON

At the turn of the millennium, American parents are eager, even anxious, for their children's academic progress and want schools that train children to be more competitive in the global culture of information and technology. Sobering studies comparing the American educational system with Asian and European counterparts alarm us the way Sputnik affected our parents.

This cultural anxiety shapes our schools in many ways. Writing in a January, 1999, issue of *The New York Times Education Life*, Michael Winerip documented a direct connection between the desire to push children and the twin effects of standardized testing and increased homework. "At this point in American history, the most important measure [of a successful school], the one that gets printed in all the newspapers, the one that individual schools and entire school districts are measured by and all the politicians talk about, is performance on standardized tests. And as long as that is true, those backpacks are likely to be full each night starting in grade 1 and maybe earlier."

Some schools have responded to this pressure by accelerating curricula. We know of a school in Texas that routinely orders the math curricula for the grade ahead, so that second graders take third grade math, and so on for each grade. And it is commonly observed by veteran teachers that kindergarten, especially in many private schools, has increasingly become more of a junior first grade, complete with phonics and math worksheets.

In some ways, the classical Christian school movement finds fertile soil in this culture of competition and acceleration. A certain rigor has always attended a classical training--the liberal arts are as demanding as any other art and one must work to master them. There is no royal road to learning, no short-cut to mastery of the basics. Reading and mastering place value are not natural learnings which anyone is ever likely to attain without some drill and practice.

Trinity has never been a cookie-cutter, franchised classical school. From the beginning we have tried to think carefully about what we are doing, and we have responded to this cultural angst and hurry by saying that we want our education to be "well-paced" and not accelerated. If, as I suspect, this value stands in some tension with the value of a classical education, I can only hope that such tension will be creative and will generate fresh, substantive, and biblical responses to these vital questions.

Most discussions about academic challenges are about intelligence, and most academic measures aim to render concrete and countable this essential abstract quality. It is the more intelligent children that we want to make sure to challenge; it is they who are easily "bored" when, say, the class moves through a review. Intelligence is a widely valued and honored capacity, and a school like Trinity

needs to be prepared to teach students of both average and exceptional intelligence.

On the other hand, there is another human capacity that a school like Trinity must attend to. This is a quality which sets us apart from the animals, a distinctively human trait, namely, the intellect. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, Richard Hofstadter draws the distinction between intelligence and intellect. Intelligence is highly practical, that excellence of mind which is employed within a fairly narrow, immediate, and predictable range. It is the capacity that allows one to win at chess, to solve a quadratic equation, or to summarize an argument from the *Summa*. Intellect, on the other hand, is the creative, contemplative, critical side of mind, that which leads one to examine, ponder, wonder, theorize, criticize, and imagine. Intelligence answers hard questions; intellect turns answers into questions.

Intelligence can be praised in animals (like border collies or porpoise); intellect is a unique display of human dignity. Intelligence lives off ideas; intellect lives for ideas. Ideas are deadly serious--good ideas, like good food, can nourish the soul, and bad ideas are a sort of poison. At the same time, there is a certain playfulness about the life of the mind, just as lovers who are deadly serious will often be laughing at one another. This combination of piety and playfulness is a wonderful thing, and the more we at Trinity capture these twin values and hold them together, the more challenging our school will be for all students.

Trinity can break and re-make the educational mold by being a school that not only trains the intelligence but also stimulates, respects, and enjoys the intellect. It is relatively easy to fashion a school into a place that stretches and stimulates intelligence. One can move a long way in that direction simply by ordering from a catalogue. But to build a school that is devoted to the intellect--that is a much taller order. It means, first and foremost, the gathering of people--teachers, parents, friends--who themselves embody this teeming fascination with the life of the mind. And the best sign of hope that I have for this fledgling school is this: That in my lifetime I have never experienced a greater concentration of Christians of unmistakably intellectual bent than here at Trinity. My prayer is that their tribe will increase, that God will guard us from the dangers that attend this blessing, and that this community of learners will increasingly become a place that challenges all of us to honor Christ with our minds.